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Tale of the military secret, the boy Malchish Kibalchish and his firm word

PROGRESS MINI & RADUGA MINI

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Translated by Eric Konkol

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"Tell us a story, Natka," a little blue-eyed girl asked and smiled guiltily.
"A story?" Natka thought. "I don't know any stories. Or.... I'll tell you Alka's story. May I?" she asked Alka, who suddenly pricked up his ears.
"Okay," Alka allowed, looking proudly at the little Octobrists, who had all fallen silent.
"I'll tell Alka's story in my own words. If I forget something or make a mistake, he'll correct me. So now, listen: In those long-ago years, when the thunder of war had just fallen silent throughout the country,

there lived a little boy - Kibalchish.
At that time, the Red Army had driven the White forces of the accursed bourgeoisie far away. It was quiet on those wide fields and green meadows where the rye was growing, where the buckwheat was ripening, where, amid lush fruit trees, stood a little house in which lived a little boy, nicknamed Kibalchish, with his father and older brother. They didn't have a mother. The father worked mowing hay.

The brother worked too, driving the hay wagon. And even the little boy helped first his father, then his brother. Or he simply jumped and played with other little boys.
It was a good time. Bullets weren't whizzing by, shells weren't exploding, villages weren't burning. You didn't have to lie on the floor to escape bullets, or hide in the cellar to escape the exploding shells, or run into the forest to escape the fires. There were no bourgeoisie to fear, no one to bow down to. Live and work - it was a good life.

One day, right before evening, the little boy Kibalchish stepped out onto the porch. He saw the clear sky, the breeze was warm, and the sun was setting behind the Black Mountains. All would have been well....except for one thing. The little boy heard something like thunder or knocking. It seemed to the boy that the wind did not smell of flowers from the garden or of honey from the meadows; the wind smelled of the smoke from fires or of gunpowder from explosions. He told his father, and his father, tired, came out.

"What's the matter with you?" he asked the boy, then said "It's thunder beyond the Black Mountains. Shepherds are lighting their fires beyond the Blue River as they watch their flocks and cook their dinners. Go, boy, and sleep in peace.

The boy left. He lay down to rest. But he couldn't fall asleep.

Suddenly, he heard a clatter on the street and a knock at the window. The boy looked and saw a horseman by the window. The horse was raven-black, the sword shining, cap gray, and the star red.

"Hey, arise!" shouted the rider. "Disaster has come from an unexpected quarter. The accursed bourgeoisie have attacked us from beyond the Black Mountains. Once again bullets are whistling and shells are exploding.

Our forces are fighting the bourgeoisie, and messengers are flying to summon help from the distant Red Army.”

The red-starred rider spoke these frightening words and galloped off. The boy's father went to the wall, took down his rifle, slung on his pack, and put on his ammunition belt.

"Well," the father said to the older brother, "I planted a thick field of rye. It seems there will be much for you to harvest!”

“Well," he said to the boy, "I've lived a full life, and my life was good. It seems, boy, that you'll do just fine!"

And so saying, he kissed the boy and left. He didn't have time for long good-byes because everyone could already hear and see explosions ringing out beyond the meadows, and the dawn-like lights of smoky fires burning beyond the mountains.

"Am I telling it right?" Natka asked, looking out over the quiet children.

"That's right...right, Natka," Alka answered quietly and lay his hand on her sunburnt shoulder.

Well, one day passed. A second day passed. The boy came out onto the porch. No...still no sign of the Red Army.

The boy climbed onto the roof. He stayed up there all day. No, still no sign. At night he lay down to sleep. Suddenly he heard a clatter on the street and a knock at the window. The boy looked out. Standing by the window was the same rider. Only the horse was thin and tired; only the saber was bent and darkened; only the cap was shot through, the star cut up, and his head bandaged.

"Arise!" shouted the rider. "There were small misfortunes, but now disaster is all around. There are many bourgeois soldiers, but few of us. In the field bullets fly in clouds, and shells explode in our ranks by the thousand! Arise and give help!"

The older brother arose and said to the boy: "Good-bye, boy. You'll stay here alone. You have shchi in the pot, cottage loaf on the table, water in the springs, and a head on your shoulders. Live as best you can, but don't wait for me."

One day passed; two days passed. The boy sat by the chimney on the roof and saw an unfamiliar rider approaching from the distance. The rider galloped up to the boy, leapt from his horse, and said: "Give me, dear boy, some water to drink. For three days I've had no drink, for three days I've had no sleep; three horses I've worn out. The Red Army has learned of our misfortune. The buglers have called the alarm with all their horns.

The drummers have pounded loud on their drums. The standard bearers have unfurled all the battle flags. The entire Red Army is flying and galloping to our aid. If only, boy, we can hold out until tomorrow night."

The boy climbed down off the porch and brought some water. The messenger drank his fill and galloped off.

Evening came, and the boy lay down to sleep. But he couldn't sleep.

Suddenly, he heard footsteps on the street and a rustling by the window. The boy looked out of the window and saw the same soldier. He was the same, but yet not the same. He had no horse - his horse had fallen. He had no sabre - his sabre had broken. He had no cap - it had flown away. And he swayed unsteadily.

"Arise!" he shouted for the last time. "We have shells, but the cannon are broken. We have rifles, but too few fighters. Help is near, but we lack the strength. Arise, all who are left! If only we can last the night and hold out until day!"

The boy - Kibalchish looked out onto the street. It was empty. No shutters flew open, no gates squeaked. There was no one to arise. The fathers had all gone; the brothers had all gone. There was no one left. All the boy saw emerging from a gate was a 100-year-old grandfather.

The grandfather wanted to raise his rifle, but he was so old he couldn't lift it. The grandfather wanted to strap on a sabre, but he was so weak he couldn't buckle it.

The grandfather sat on an earthen mound, lowered his head, and cried...

"Am I telling it right, Alka?" Natka asked as she took a breath and looked around.

It was no longer just the Octobrists who were listening to the story. No one knew when it happened, but the Pioneers from Ioskin's team had silently crept over. Even the Bashkir girl Eminey, who barely understood Russian, was sitting thoughtfully and seriously. Even the mischievous Vladik,

who was lying a little way off and giving the impression that he wasn't paying any attention, was in fact listening, because he was lying quietly, not talking to anyone, not pestering anyone.

"Yes, Natka, that's right. Even better than right," Alka answered, moving still closer to her.

"Well....The old grandfather sat on the earthen mound, lowered his head, and cried.

The boy felt very bad. Then the boy Kibalchish leapt out onto the street and shouted as loudly as he could:

"Hey, you, children, kids!

Are we children only good for playing and skipping rope?
Our fathers have gone; our brothers have gone. Are we children just going to sit and wait for the bourgeoisie to come and take us away into their accursed bourgeois land?"
As soon as the children heard these words, they began to shout out at the tops of their voices! They came running out doors, climbing through windows, and leaping over fences.
They all wanted to help. Only the little boy Plokhish wanted to join the bourgeoisie. But this Plokhish was so sneaky that he didn't say anything to anyone. He pulled on his pants and raced along with everyone else as if to help.
The children fought on through the dark night and into the dawn. Only Plokhish did not fight. He was going around looking for a way to help the bourgeoisie. Behind a small hill, Plokhish saw a pile of boxes, and hidden in these boxes were black bombs, white shells, and yellow cartridges.
"Aha," thought Plokhish, "this is just what I need."
At that very moment, the Chief Bourgeois was asking his bourgeois forces:
"Well, bourgeoisie, have you won victory?"
"No, Chief Bourgeois," the bourgeois forces answered.

"We smashed the fathers and brothers, and victory was ours. But then the boy Kibalchish rushed up to help, and we just can't defeat him."

The Chief Bourgeois was greatly surprised and grew very angry. He shouted in a terrible voice: "Is it possible that you can't defeat a boy? You worthless, cowardly bourgeoisie! How is it possible that you can't destroy so insignificant a creature? Go quickly, and don't come back without victory!"

The bourgeoisie sat and thought, "What can we do?" Suddenly they saw the boy Plokhish climb out of the bushes and come straight for them. "Rejoice!" he shouted to them. "I, Plokhish, did it all. I cut wood, I piled up hay, I set fire to the boxes with the black bombs, white shells, and yellow cartridges. You'll hear them explode any moment now!"

The bourgeoisie rejoiced and immediately enlisted the boy Plokhish in their bourgeois land. They gave him a whole barrel of jam and an entire basket of cookies!

The boy Plokhish sat down, ate, and was happy. Suddenly, the burning boxes exploded! It was as if a thousand thunderclaps sounded at the same time and a thousand bolts of lightening flashed from the same cloud..

"Treason!" shouted the boy Kibalchish.
"Treason!" shouted all the loyal children
Out of the smoke and fire, the bourgeois forces swooped down. They surrounded and seized the boy Kibalchish.
They fettered the boy in strong chains. They locked him up in a stone tower.
They hurried to ask the Chief Bourgeois what he would order them to do with the captive boy.

The Chief Bourgeois thought and thought for a long time, and then said:
"We shall kill this boy. But first let him tell us their Military Secret. Go, bourgeoisie, and ask him:
'Why, boy, did Forty Tsars and Forty Kings fight and fight with the Red Army only to be themselves defeated?'

'Why, boy, with the jails and prison camps full, with police on the streets, with troops on the march, do we still have no peace, either in the light of day or dark of night? Why, you damned boy Kibalchish, in my Grand Bourgeois Land, in the Kingdom of the Plains, in the Snowy Tsardom, in the Hot Arid State,

on the same day in early spring, on the same day in late autumn, in different languages do they sing the same songs, in different hands carry the same banners, give the same speeches, think the same and act the same?'

"Ask him, bourgeoisie: 'Boy, does the Red Army have some military secret?' And let him tell you that secret. 'Are our workers receiving foreign help?' And let him tell you from where that help is coming. Then ask 'Boy, is there some secret way from your country into all other countries, a way by which, when you call, among them they respond; when you begin singing, among them they take up the song; when you speak, among them they have the same thoughts?'"

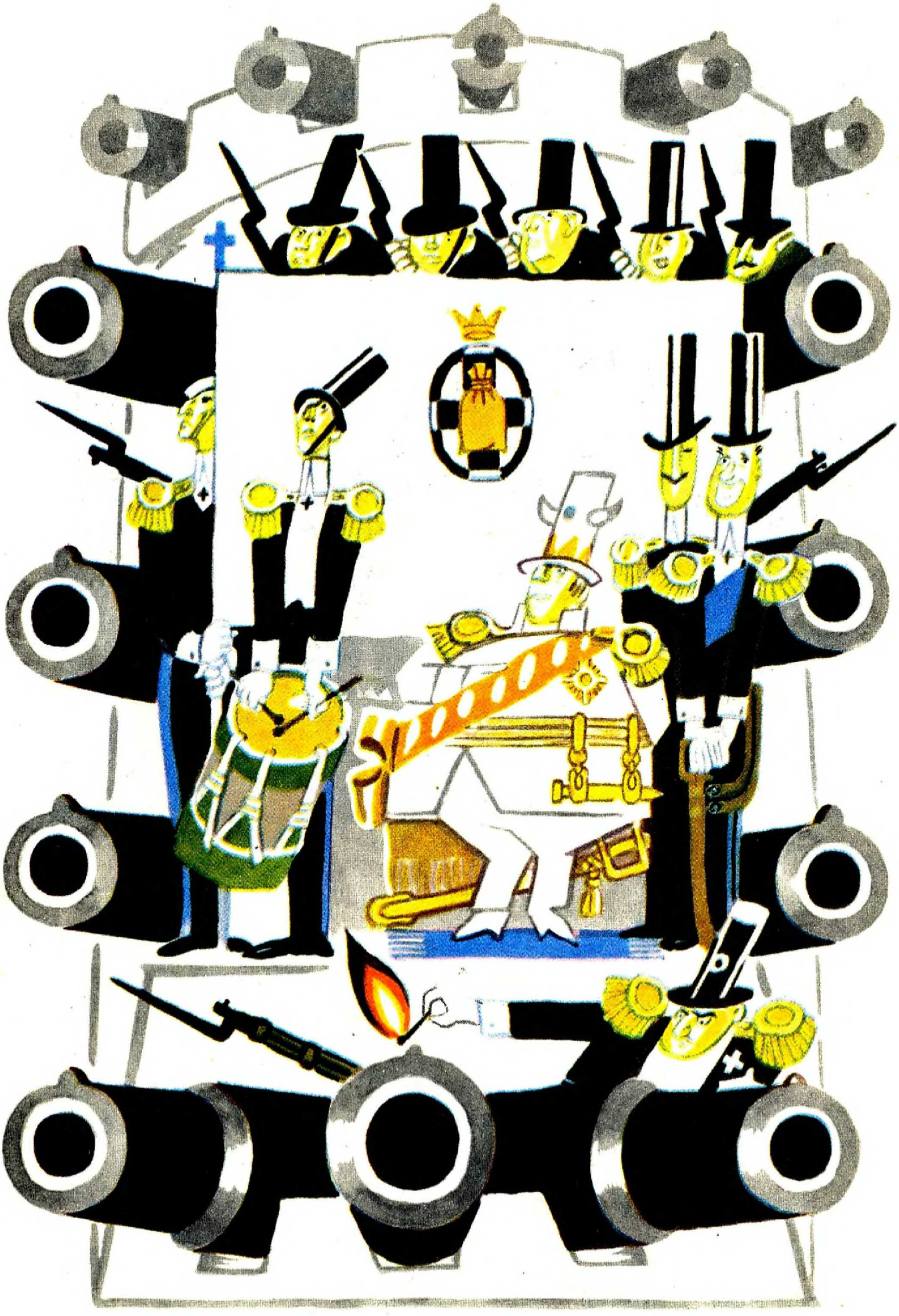
The bourgeoisie left and quickly returned:

"No, Chief Bourgeois, the boy Kibalchish did not reveal the Military Secret to us. He laughed in our faces. 'There is,' he said, 'a great and powerful secret in the Red Army. And as you can never understand it, you will never achieve victory.'

'There are,' he said, 'reserves without number and no matter how many you lock up in prisons, you'll never get them all. And you'll never have peace in the light of day or the dark of night.'

'There are,' he said, 'deep, secret pathways. But no matter how long you search for them, you'll never find them. And even if you did find them, you could never fill them up, block them up, cover them over. I'll say nothing more to you, bourgeoisie. And you, accursed ones, will never guess the truth.'"

The Chief Bourgeois frowned and said: "Subject this secretive boy Kibalchish to the most horrible torment. Torture him until he reveals the Military Secret, because we will never have peace without this great Secret!" The bourgeoisie left, and this time they were not quick to return. When they came back, they were shaking their heads.



"No," they said, "Chief Bourgeois, our leader - the boy turned pale, but stood proud. He did not reveal to us the Military Secret because his word was so firm. And when we left, he lay down on the floor and pressed his ear to the hard, cold, stone floor and - whether you believe it or not, O, Chief Bourgeois - he smiled in such a way that we, the bourgeoisie, shivered and became frightened that perhaps he heard our inescapable destruction moving along the secret pathways."

"It's not secret pathways. It's the Red Army galloping!" excitedly shouted out the Octobrist Karasikov, unable to restrain himself.

And he waved his hand with an imaginary sabre so fiercely that even the girl who just recently - hopping on one leg - had fearlessly teased him as "Krasik-rugasik", looked at him warily and, just to be safe, moved away a little further.

Natka interrupted the story because just then, the lunch bell rang.

"Finish the story!" Alka ordered in a commanding voice, looking at her with a hurt expression.

"Finish the story!" persuasively pronounced the red-faced Ioska. "And then we'll get in line quickly."

Natka looked around. The children were not getting up. She saw their many different heads-white-haired, dark-haired, chestnut-colored, golden-colored. Gazing at her from all sides were eyes: big, brown ones like Alka's; clear, cornflower-blue ones like those of the girl who had asked for the story; narrow, black one's like Eminey's. And many, many other eyes - usually happy and mischievious, but now thoughful and serious.

"All right, children, I'll finish the story."

"...And we became frightened, Chief Bourgeois, that perhaps he heard our inescapable destruction moving along the secret pathways."

"What kind of country is this?" exclaimed the surprised Chief Bourgeois. "What kind of incomprehensible country is this where even little children know the Military Secret and yet so firmly keep their solemn word? Hurry, bourgeoisie, and kill this proud boy. Load the cannons, ready your sabres, unfurl our bourgeois banners, because I hear our buglers sounding the alarm and our signalers waving their flags. It seems we will not have an easy fight, but a fierce battle!"

"And the boy Kibalchish died," said Natka.

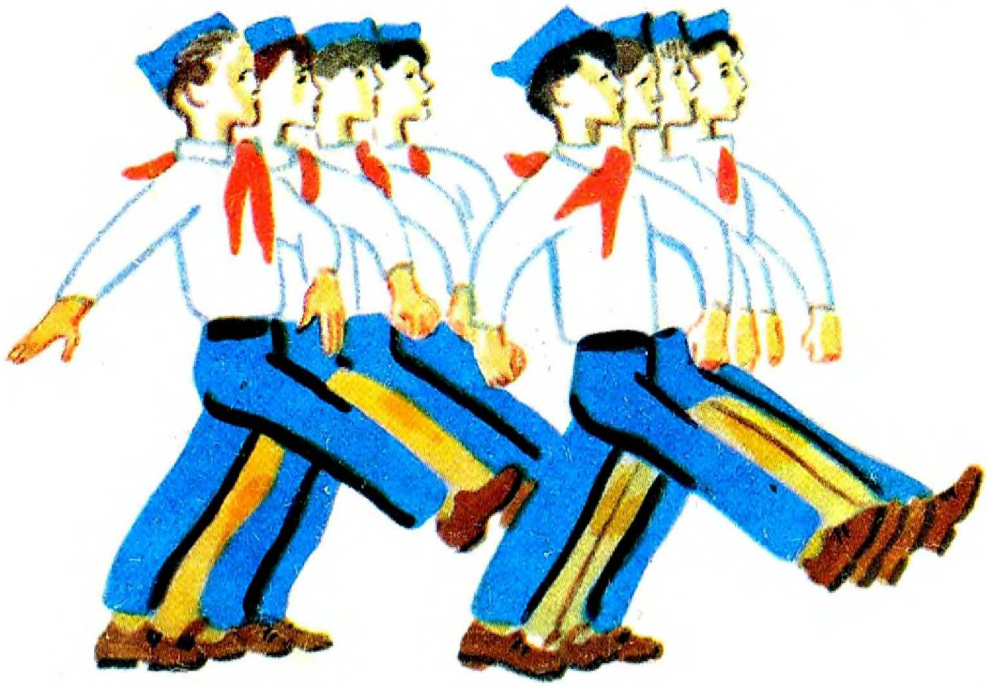
Hearing these unexpected words, the Octobrist Karasinkov's face suddenly became sad and dismayed, and he no longer waved his arm.

The blue-eyed girl frowned, and the freckled face of Ioskin became angry as if he had just been deceived or insulted.
The children stirred, exchanged whispers. Only Alka, who already knew this story, sat quietly.
"Children, have you ever seen a storm?" Natka asked loudly, looking at the children who had fallen silent. "Just like that - like thunder - crashed the weapons in battle. Just like that - like lightening - flashed the fiery explosions. Just like that - like the wind - raced the calvary detachments. And just like that - like clouds - red banners covered the sky. Just like that, the Red Army attacked."
“Have you seen a pouring thunderstorm in the hot, dry summer? Just like that - like streams racing down a dusty mountain side, joining into a seething, bubbling flow - at the first sound of war, uprisings boiled up in the Mountain Bourgeois Land and were echoed by thousands of voices in the Kingdom of the Plains, the Snowy Tsardom, and the Hot and Arid State.”
“In fear, the defeated Chief Bourgeois fled, loudly cursing this nation with its surprising people, its unconquerable army and its unguessable Military Secret.”

“The boy Kibalchish was buried on a green hill by the Blue River. And on the grave they planted a large red flag.

Boats sail past - greetings to the Boy!
Planes fly past - greetings to the Boy!
Trains race by - greetings to the Boy!
Pioneers march past - salute to the Boy!
And that, children, is the whole story.”

(1935)



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International project:
"Mini Progress and Mini Raduga"